This chapter describes how older adults are portrayed in various media. By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- Describe the meaning of the term “underrepresentation”
- Summarize the media contexts in which older people are underrepresented in the media
- Describe the situations in which older adults are positively and negatively represented in the media
- Talk about historical trends in portrayals of older people
- Understand the media industry dynamics that might influence portrayals of older adults
[Seniors] do not see themselves portrayed and when then do, it's in a demeaning manner. They're referred to as "over the hill," "old goats" and "old farts"—oh please, ugly ways of talking about us.

—Doris Roberts [Marie Barone on Everybody Loves Raymond], Interview with the Parents Television Council, 2003

If we want to understand where a group stands in society, there are few better ways of getting information than by watching television. If a group of people is featured prominently on TV and is shown in a positive light, and the main characters in most shows come from that group, you can probably safely conclude that the group is valued by society and has power. Likewise, if you don't see a group, or they tend to be shown in peripheral or negative roles, you can conclude that this group lacks clout. In social science terms, the group lacks vitality. Vitality refers to a group's strength, status, size, and influence in a particular context. In the United States, white men as a group have the highest vitality (just look at the list of U.S. presidents: White men = 42, Others = 0).

So it is with age groups. Numerous scholars have examined different media contexts, particularly television, with the goal of understanding how and when age groups are shown, and thus drawing inferences about the relative power of different age groups in society. What they have found may not surprise those of you who have read the earlier chapters in this book, or indeed those of you who spend a lot of time watching television. In this chapter, I describe some of these findings, focusing particularly on North American and European media. Chapter 10 presents some cross-cultural data on this issue.

Underrepresentation

One of the most common techniques for examining group portrayals on television is simply to count the number of members of certain groups in some sample of programming. The proportions of different groups can then be compared to some baseline (generally the proportions of those groups in the real population). Figure 8.1 presents such a comparison for age groups. In this case, all prime-time major network television shows from 1999 were compared with year 2000 census bureau data. As you can see, the TV shows contain many
more young adults (20–34 years old) than are actually present in the U.S. population. In contrast, the shows contain significantly fewer older adults. This phenomenon is called underrepresentation. Older people were about 3% of the television population, but almost 15% of the real population. Over the past 30 years, results consistent with this pattern have been fairly consistent in the research literature (Arnoff, 1974; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980; Greenberg, Korzenny, & Atkin, 1980). In general, fewer than 5% of prime-time television characters are over 65. J. D. Robinson and Skill (1995a) statistically compared proportions of older adults in different studies over time and demonstrated that little change has occurred (at least up until that point in time). The same pattern emerges when television advertising is examined (Miller, Levell, & Mazachek, 2004; Roy & Harwood 1997), and similar patterns emerge in game shows and cartoons (Harris & Feinberg, 1977; Levinson, 1973). A recent analysis finds that about 8% of characters in children’s cartoons are portrayed as over 55, as compared to well over 20% in the population as a whole (T. Robinson & Anderson, 2006).

**Figure 8.1** Comparison of Prime-Time Television Population With Census Bureau Data

Some exceptions have been claimed. For instance, Cassata, Anderson, and Skill’s (1980) analysis of soap operas is sometimes cited as indicating better representation of older people in that type of programming. They found that about 16% of soap opera characters were over the age of 55. However, about half of those “older adult” characters were in their 50s, meaning that only about 8% of characters were over 60, and presumably even fewer over the age of 65. Elliott (1984) also found about 8% of soap characters were over 60 (as compared to about 14% of the population as a whole). These studies combined suggest that older adults may not be as severely underrepresented in soap operas as they are elsewhere, but they are still underrepresented (Cassata & Irwin, 1997). As you can see from this brief discussion, when interpreting this research it is very important to know what the “cut-off” is for someone to count as “old”—comparing people 55 and older on television with people 65 and older in the population will yield erroneous conclusions of “fair” representation on television. Petersen (1973) is often cited as the most dramatic illustration of older people having a substantial presence on television. Her study found almost 13% of television characters to be over 65, as compared to about 10% in the population at the time. She was working with a relatively small sample (only 247 characters) and did not report all the details of her method, but her results remain something of an aberration compared to the rest of the published literature. One final note: The vast majority of the literature has focused on entertainment television. Other areas of television may feature significantly more older people. For instance, in early 2005, Donald Rumsfeld (Former U.S. secretary of defense) appeared on CNN’s Larry King Show. Both host and guest were in their early 70s, and both could be considered very significant cultural figures in the United States at that point in time. For half an hour, at least, cable news programming was dominated by older adults. We don’t really know how frequently events like this occur.

Less work exists on media other than television, but that research also reflects the underrepresentation pattern. Magazine advertisements feature older adults at substantially lower levels than their presence in the population, even when a wide variety of magazines are examined (Harwood & Roy, 1999). For instance, Gantz, Gartenberg, and Rainbow (1980) found that older people are present in only about 6% of magazine advertisements that include humans. Ladies’ Home Journal, Ms., People, Playboy, and Sports Illustrated all recorded even fewer ads featuring older people, while only Time and Reader’s Digest had somewhat larger numbers of such ads. Similar underrepresentation
occurs in children’s literature (Robin, 1977), children’s magazines (Almerico & Fillmer, 1988), newspaper advertisements (Buchholz & Bynum, 1982), and popular movies (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005). Atkinson and Ragab (2004) examined the presence of older people in movies from 1980 to 1999, finding about 6% of the characters to be over the age of 60, a slightly higher number than that of television studies, but still a marked underrepresentation.

As you can see from the dates of the studies cited in the previous paragraphs, the patterns seem depressingly consistent over the years, with very little indication of trends toward increased representation of older adults, despite their growing presence in the population. Miller et al. (2004) examined television commercials across five decades and found no trend toward increasing portrayals of older adults (indeed, their data appear to indicate a peak in numbers of older people in ads in the 1970s). These data, unfortunately, are from a nonrepresentative sample, so the comparisons across decades may not be valid. Nevertheless, the media seem slow to recognize the growing presence and influence of this group.

Many researchers have further examined this phenomenon by examining proportions of men and women in these different media. Again, the findings have been relatively consistent across media and across time. Men are consistently represented in larger numbers on television and in magazines than are women, and this pattern tends to be exaggerated among older people. Gerbner and his colleagues (1980), for instance, showed a huge bulge of female television characters in their 20s, followed by a dramatic decline. Women over 40 were rare in their sample. Men, on the other hand, peaked in numbers in their late 30s, again followed by a relatively steep decline. Raman and colleagues (Raman, Harwood, Weis, Anderson, & Miller, 2006) show a similar pattern in magazine advertising, as do Stern and Mastro (2004) in television commercials (see also Box 8.1). Research has found that older men appear as much as ten times as frequently as older women (e.g., Petersen, 1973). The most recent research on this issue (T. Robinson & Anderson, 2006) shows a similar pattern among characters in children’s television cartoons—approximately 77% of older characters on those shows are male. You can do your own informal survey of this issue using Exercise 8.1.

Interpretations of these findings focus on how men achieve a certain status with old age, whereas that status is not accorded to women. This relates, in part, back to some of the evolutionary explanations for differences in attitudes about older men versus older women (see Chapter 3). For instance,
Lauzen and Dozier (2005) examined 88 of the top 100 grossing films in the United States of 2002 (think, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *Spiderman*, *Lord of the Rings (Two Towers)*, *Chicago*, etc.). They assessed the age and sex of all characters, as well as coding each in terms of leadership, role in the film (major/minor), and a number of other variables. The graph above shows the distribution of male and female characters across different age groups, as compared to those groups’ actual presence in the population. So values above the zero-point indicate that groups are overrepresented in movies; below the midpoint indicates underrepresentation. As you can see, movies demonstrate a similar pattern to television and advertising. Women are overrepresented in their 20s and 30s, whereas men are overrepresented in their 30s and 40s. So men appear to retain a desirability and marketability for longer than women. Men and women are underrepresented in movies once they reach their 50s and 60s, but this underrepresentation is somewhat more severe for women. The authors of this study also found that men aged 40–69 were often powerful and in leadership positions, whereas women in these age groups were less powerful and had less in the way of personal goals. Similar patterns are shown in a study of 20 years of movie portrayals by Atkinson and Ragab (2004).

NOTE: Y-axis represents percent difference between presence in movies and in U.S. population. Negative numbers indicate underrepresentation in movies.
Exercise 8.1 Gender Bias in Media Portrayals of Age?

Recall the most recent movie you saw. Estimate the age and sex of the two or three major characters. If you are reading this book as part of a class, summarize this information for the whole class in the table below. What does it show?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gerbner et al. (1980) note that “woman actually outnumber men among [television] characters in their early twenties, when their function as romantic partners is supposed to peak... The character population is structured to provide a relative abundance of younger women for older men, but no such abundance of younger men for older women” (p. 40). In other words, Gerbner and his colleagues suggest that the television world is something of a fantasy situation for older men, who have a positive cornucopia of younger women from whom to pick a (fantasy) mate. Underlying this is, presumably, an ideology in which attractiveness as a mate (reproductive function) is valued above other factors in determining when and how women are shown on television. Accompanying this trend for younger women is the fact that women also seem to take on the more negative characteristics associated with age earlier than men—women in their 50s are more often categorized as fitting negative age stereotypes than are men (Signorielli, 2004). Thus, Paul Newman, Harrison Ford, Clint Eastwood, and many others retain a “sexy” image into their 50s, 60s, and even later, while thinking of their equivalents among Hollywood actresses is considerably more challenging.

Work on racial and ethnic disparities in portrayals of older adults is relatively rare and hard to interpret. As noted earlier, there are relatively few
older adults on television, and among those the majority are portrayals of whites. For instance, Harwood and Anderson (2002) examined 835 television characters and found only four African American characters over the age of 60. Statistically it is virtually impossible to reach any conclusions about representations of older African Americans from such a sample; other ethnic groups were almost totally absent from the 60+ age group. Research aiming to examine ethnic variation among older television characters will either have to examine a gargantuan sample of programs and characters, or it will have to figure out a way of targeting specific portrayals of particular interest.

**Negative Representation**

In addition to the underrepresentation of older adults, it is important to look at how they are portrayed when indeed they are shown. Three predominant themes emerge suggesting that older people are portrayed negatively in most media. However, positive portrayals also exist (discussed later), and portrayals in most media are fairly complex and variable. Beyond the research described below, you may want to think about portrayals of aging in cartoons (Polivka, 1988), literature (Kehl, 1985; Woodward, 1991), jokes (Richman, 1977) or popular music (Leitner, 1983).

**Health**

As described earlier in the book, one pressing concern for social gerontologists is the almost obsessive societal link between aging and health. As was talked about in Chapter 1, our society finds it almost impossible to talk about aging without talking about health, and indeed “aging” is sometimes used to refer directly to declining health. The media also appear to fall for this link. Most research examining older people demonstrates that they are associated with ill health in a variety of ways in media portrayals. One of the best ways to demonstrate this connection is with advertising portrayals. Raman and colleagues (2006), for instance, examined the types of products that feature older adults in their magazine advertisements. In North American advertising, older people were overwhelmingly associated with health-related products. Interestingly, many of these products were for ailments that are not particularly age-related (e.g., allergy medications), although some were for products with clear age connections (e.g., incontinence treatments, Alzheimer’s drugs). As will be described below, the individual portrayals of older people in these
ads are not necessarily negative. The concern is with the perpetual linking of age and health, which reinforces the connection between those two things. Sometimes, we see dramatic illustrations of ways in which individual decisions such as those of headline writers can change whether a media portrayal emphasizes decline in old age—often a subtly different spin can have dramatic consequences (see Box 8.2). Chapter 11 has more detailed coverage of specific communication and health issues in older adulthood.

**Box 8.2** Mass Communication About Aging: A Case Study—Are Older Surgeons’ Patients More Likely to Die?

In early September 2006, I noticed a headline in my local newspaper: “Study: Aging Surgeons Less Effective in Some Surgeries.” Being interested in aging, I read the article. It appeared to report that patients of older surgeons die more often, but the exact findings of the original study on which the article was based weren’t entirely clear. Google news quickly directed me to other articles based on the same original study. All of the articles included basically the same information, but the headlines varied quite dramatically in terms of their implications about older surgeons’ skills. Consider the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Raises Questions About Aging Surgeons’ Last Years</th>
<th>With Surgeons, Older May Not Be Better</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Older Surgeons Not Necessarily Better</td>
<td>Aging Surgeons Under Scrutiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Surgeons Still Good—If Busy</td>
<td>Surgical Work Can Outlast Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are Older Surgeons Better?</td>
<td>When Should Surgeons Hang Up Their Scrubs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study: Surgeon’s Experience as Important as Age</td>
<td>Study Questions Surgeons’ Last Years Behind Scalpel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study: High-Volume Surgeons Best</td>
<td>(Continued)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of Surgeon Is Not Important Predictor of Risk for Patient</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I was immediately struck by how the same original information could be presented in so many different ways, and I was particularly concerned about the impact that these different headlines might have on a reader who was quickly
scanning the newspaper. Some appear to suggest that there are significant problems with older surgeons, while others explicitly say that age is not important, and some don’t mention age at all. In this case, the headline writers have interpreted the results of the original study and either emphasized or deemphasized the role of age. What was the actual finding of the study? Older surgeons’ patients did die more often for three of eight types of surgery examined (they were equal on five of the eight). But that death rate was because more of the older surgeons were performing relatively few operations—they were getting less “practice” than younger surgeons. Older surgeons who maintained a regular surgical load had performance that was as good or better than younger surgeons. There are three morals to this story: (a) If you’re getting a surgery done, you should ignore the surgeon’s age but make sure you ask how often the surgeon performs the specific procedure that you’re about to undergo, (b) when you read a newspaper headline suggesting a link between age and some other variable, try to dig a little deeper and see what the original research actually found, and (c) if you are writing newspaper headlines, don’t jump to a conclusion based on one piece of information—consider the effects on your readers when stating a conclusion like “aging surgeons less effective.”

Lead Versus Peripheral Roles

A frequent observation of scholars examining older adults on television is that they are rarely shown in major roles. J. D. Robinson and Skill (1995b) have developed a theoretical perspective surrounding this phenomenon: peripheral imagery theory. This theory suggests that minor or peripheral characters in a media presentation may be more revealing than central characters as concerns societal portrayals. Specifically, major characters in television shows, for instance, tend to develop over time, have idiosyncrasies, and have a detailed back story that allows us to view them as a complete person. Minor characters, on the other hand, are present for a short period, serve some rather specific plot function, and then disappear. As such, they need to be processed and understood rather quickly by the audience. In doing this quick processing, it is likely that the audience relies on schemas or stereotypes about the groups that the characters come from. Thus, the writers will create
characters that fit with the audience's schema. For instance, if you need a character who is hard of hearing in order to make a joke work, having an older person serve that function will work best. Their poor hearing fits the viewer's schema of old age, and hence the writer doesn't have to spend valuable time explaining that they are deaf. Thus, the fact that older adults are often present in peripheral roles enhances the likelihood that they will be portrayed in a stereotypical fashion. One disclaimer: Some studies do not support the contention that older adults are shown more frequently in peripheral roles (e.g., Harwood & Anderson, 2002). The diverging findings on this issue may be a function of the relatively small number of older adults on television; when we are only looking at a relatively small number of older characters, it becomes statistically challenging to examine subtle issues like whether they are portrayed peripherally in larger numbers than other age groups. Either way, peripheral characters are important to examine because of the ways that they reveal stereotypical images (J. D. Robinson, Skill, & Turner, 2004).

Humor

Funny messages are a media staple: From blockbuster comedy movies and network situation comedies to basic cable's Comedy Central channel, comedy is ubiquitous. Older people and aging are used a lot for comic effect, often in less-than-flattering ways. Comedy can be achieved by having a stereotypical older character who is the butt of other characters' jokes (e.g., the dirty old man, the forgetful aging parent). Such messages obviously rely on shared knowledge of the stereotype for their humor and almost certainly serve to reinforce that stereotype. An advertising campaign for baseball on the Fox network featured an 89-year-old ex-baseball player supposedly making a comeback. One spot showed the man attempting to pitch: “After lobbing a massive gob of spit onto a baseball, he weakly throws the ball a mere couple of feet” (Petrecca, 1999, p. 8).

Messages About the Aging Process

In addition to actual portrayals of older people, the media send a variety of messages about the aging process that can be construed as negative. Perhaps most salient here are the advertisements for cosmetics that promote “younger” skin, moisturizers that have “anti-wrinkle” formulas, and dyes
developed specifically to hide grey hair. While we have grown accustomed to these products and probably don’t think twice about them, the marketing of them is explicitly ageist. The premise is that we all want to hide any signs that we are aging, and that this is natural and normal. Justine Coupland (2003) makes a powerful argument that cosmetics advertisers not only want to make aging skin seem pathological but also want to induce guilt in women by making women themselves feel “responsible” for wrinkles. Note that this is a very gendered discourse, with women being targeted massively more than men for such products. The message is one that is clearly opposed to the visible manifestations of aging, and hence is ageist. All this occurs, despite the fact that (to quote J. Coupland), “to live in the world is to age, day by day, from birth. How can advertisers persuade women that stopping the ageing process or, rather, disguising its effects on the body is achievable?” (p. 128).

Other troublesome messages about aging occur in the media’s use of phrases like “senior moment” (Bonnesen & Burgess, 2004), descriptions of the physical status of “veteran” athletes (often in their late 20s!), and perhaps even in advertisements for financial services for retirees that tend to focus on leisure activities and do not portray the many constructive ways in which older people contribute to society. Even more destructive messages are present in media like birthday cards, but of course such messages are intended to be funny, and hence their creators would perhaps argue that they are harmless. I would disagree! There is very little research on these kinds of portrayals or their effects on people who see them. If you are reading this book as part of a class, you might want to discuss some ways in which some of these forms of communication talk about the aging process: Take a look at Dillon and Jones’s (1981) study of birthday cards and then visit your local Hallmark store to sample the wares.

Positive Portrayals

There are a few areas in which it is possible to identify positive elements in portrayals of older people, although in some cases these need to be subject to some critical thinking. Some researchers describe positive media portrayals of aging without a clear comparison point. For instance, Vernon, Williams, Phillips, and Wilson (1990) describe positive portrayals of older people in prime-time television on a variety of dimensions. However, they have no comparison with the portrayal of younger people, so we can’t know whether these
“positive” portrayals are different from (i.e., less positive than) portrayals of younger characters. Likewise, Cassata et al. (1980) describe generally positive portrayals of older people in daytime soaps, but again without a comparison to younger people. Kessler, Rekoczy, and Staudinger (2004) engage in a rather complicated analysis attempting to compare older adults’ portrayals to some objective standards of life success. They suggest that portrayals of older adults in German television are positive. Again, however, we do not know whether portrayals of younger people are even more positive because portrayals of younger people were not examined. This is a crucial point: It may be that older adults are not portrayed in an overwhelmingly negative fashion, but they are nevertheless portrayed less positively than young people.

Certain apparently positive portrayals also require a somewhat more detailed examination to understand the complex ways in which older people are shown. Next we consider some common areas of apparently positive portrayals. The filmography in Box 8.3 provides a list of movies that should lead to interesting discussion about portrayals of aging.

Box 8.3 Filmography of Interesting Portrayals of Aging

The following are movies with positive, interesting, or controversial portrayals of aging. I am not recommending these as the best images of aging that are out there. Rather, they are movies that give interesting starting points for discussing how the media portray aging. In many cases, they also provide interesting perspectives on intergenerational relationships, something that has not been studied extensively. I have also included films on different portions of the life span: Portrayals of middle age (e.g., The Big Chill) are interesting in that they often present people first coming to terms with their own aging. It is crucial to watch the movies critically, considering the ways in which they present aging as a diverse and positive experience, the ways in which they stereotype the older characters, and the ways in which aging is at times sentimentalized. If you are reading this book as part of a class, you might want to watch one of the movies and discuss its portrayal, or divide them up among the class, and share the different narratives of age that you see with one another. I have also included a few television shows that have interesting portrayals of older people.

(Continued)
Older adults who have engaged in activities that are dramatically counter-stereotypical (going against the stereotype) are a staple of “human interest” sections of newspapers and local TV news—the classic case here is the 83-year-old grandma who jumps out of an airplane. Older adults who run marathons, cycle across the Rocky Mountains, climb Everest, or get shot out of canons are subject to similar treatment. Little research has been done on these portrayals, but they do seem to share similar features. Most notably, the exceptionality of these achievements is a common theme (the older adults concerned are described as remarkable, amazing, fantastic, and the like). Most of the stereotype violations are positive, but sometimes these individuals have violated stereotypes in a negative fashion (e.g., in December 2005, a 70-year-old grandmother achieved some notoriety when she stole the baby Jesus from a nativity scene: “Granny Lifts Baby Jesus,” 2005).

Clearly such portrayals might have the capacity to change our perceptions of aging, given that they feature individuals who have ignored the constraints that society places on old age, instead choosing to pursue exciting and generally personally rewarding activities. However, the very newsworthiness of these
achievements, and the way in which these older people are portrayed as exceptional, tends to discount any positive impact that the stories might have on our more general views of older people. The focus on the individuals as exceptional makes it clear that a typical older adult does not do these things, and perhaps that they should not. One skydiving grandma is on the news precisely because she is doing something that is not representative of most old people. You may wish to refer back to Chapter 7, which discussed the role of representativeness or typicality of older adults in having the potential to change attitudes.

Central Characters

The exceptional or atypical portrayals described above are also apparent in some fictional characters—generally they tend to be the lead characters in shows. While older adults are rarely lead characters in shows, when they are the leads, they often portray older adulthood in apparently positive and almost always counter-stereotypical ways. The most commonly discussed of these in recent years is The Golden Girls, which aired on NBC from 1985 to 1992 but is still showing in syndication. Other similar shows are Murder, She Wrote, Diagnosis Murder, Matlock, and Jake and the Fatman. These shows often capitalize on particular star power. A show like The Golden Girls that features four older women would be a very tough sell to most network executives (see below). However, when it includes recognizable stars like Estelle Getty, Bea Arthur, and Betty White, it comes with a built-in audience of people who like those actresses, and thus is sustainable. Similar star power is apparent on Murder, She Wrote (Angela Lansbury), Matlock (Andy Griffith), and other such shows. These shows thrive among the older audience because, as will be elaborated in the next chapter, older people generally like shows that feature older characters. Hence, while The Golden Girls was popular across the whole television audience (“Best and Worst by Numbers,” 1989), it was consistently a huge ratings winner among older viewers (Mundorf & Brownell, 1990). This audience can be attractive to certain subsets of advertisers (e.g., financial organizations offering retirement planning).

Bell (1992) examined a number of shows featuring older characters as the leads in the late 1980s and concluded that the older characters were shown as affluent, healthy, active, admired, and sexy. Such portrayals are in stark contrast to the “average” portrayals of older adults that are negative (as described above; remember that J. D. Robinson and Skill (1995b) suggested that peripheral
characters tend to be more stereotypically portrayed than leads). Lead characters necessarily involve more complexity than peripheral characters, and they also need to be more likeable. Thus, in the rare instances where older characters get to be the lead in the show, they are likely to be positively portrayed.

Unfortunately, a few factors make these lead characters’ positive portrayals less exciting than we might hope. First, as described in more detail in the next chapter, younger people are unlikely to watch these shows. Hence, no matter how positive the portrayal, younger people are unlikely to see it or be affected by it! Second, such portrayals may be less positive than you might imagine for some older people. In particular, Mares and Cantor (1992) show that some older people (those who were coping less well with their own aging) found the highly engaged, active, and competent characters on television to be somewhat threatening. Third, there appears to be a decline in this kind of programming. During the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of shows with older adult leads maintained lengthy prime-time runs (see those listed above). In contrast, it is difficult to think of a current prime-time network show with a lead character over the age of 60. A fourth concern is that these portrayals (as well as the news portrayals of exceptional older adults described in the previous section) may at times have a humorous intent, an issue that we turn to next.

Humorous Characters

In some of my earliest research, Howard Giles and I looked at images of aging in *The Golden Girls* (Harwood & Giles, 1992). We concluded that the show did do a good job of contradicting a number of stereotypes of old age (for instance, the characters are shown as active, healthy, and sexual). However, we also expressed concern that the humor in the show often centered around ageist stereotypes in unfortunate ways. For instance, the character Blanche is the most sexually active of the characters, and her sexual exploits are often the subject of jokes in the show, which might serve to reinforce the idea that all sexual activity in older people is absurd. Indeed, when characters engaged in activity or said something that was counter to age stereotypes, the vast majority of the time it was associated with laughter on the show’s laugh track.

Advertising messages also sometimes capitalize on portraying older adults in ways that violate our stereotypes, and again, these messages often rely on humor. A 2005 beer commercial features an older woman (fairly short and plump, with grey hair) in a martial arts class. Her instructor is clearly
very skilled, but the older woman appears passive. However, when her instructor takes her beer away, the older woman immediately launches into a series of violent and very effective martial arts moves, bringing her black belt instructor to his knees. The message relies on violating the stereotype of “grandmotherly” behavior to achieve its humor. While it might superficially be seen as a positive portrayal of aging (the woman is physically strong and powerful), the humorous intent removes any likelihood that it might be interpreted in a liberating way for older people. This is, of course, only one advertisement. The next section concerns more general patterns in advertising.

Advertising

In contrast to the negative portrayals commonly found elsewhere, advertising images of seniors tend in large part to be positive. For instance, Roy and Harwood (1997) found that older characters in television ads tended to be happy and active (see also Atkins, Jenkins, & Perkins, 1991; Swayne & Greco, 1987). The same has been found with magazine advertising (Harwood & Roy, 1999). In part, of course, this can be explained by the nature of advertising. Ads are trying to sell products, and it is pretty rare for advertisers to want to depress their audience or make them unhappy. Indeed, in a recent examination of magazine advertising that I was involved in, we found happy, smiling older adults in advertisements related to Alzheimer’s disease, long-term institutionalization, and loss of bladder control (Raman et al., 2006).

Currently, there are some interesting trends in the ways that ads are using the grandparenting relationship to sell products. A number of recent ads include the implicit message: “Use our product and you can have a better relationship with your grandchild.” Figure 8.2 provides one example. The product being advertised is designed to help improve lung functioning for people with a specific ailment. The improved lung function is illustrated by the ability to blow bubbles and hence entertain the granddaughter. Obviously, being able to blow bubbles is not the primary advantage of having good lungs. But the image in the ad provides a positive spin on the product—rather than emphasizing current limitations and problems, it emphasizes future possibilities. And in presenting this somewhat idealized image of the relationship, it manages to associate the product with an uncontroversially positive thing: Very few people are opposed to grandparents and grandchildren having fun together, and so people should be in favor of this product.
Researchers in Britain have recently begun looking at advertisements featuring older adults in a more detailed, qualitative fashion, focusing especially on visual communication cues in the advertisements. This work has begun to provide some categories in which we can place different kinds of portrayals. For instance, sometimes older people are shown as comic or ridiculous (e.g., a very old man dressed in teenage clothing styles), other times they are shown as glamorous and wealthy (e.g., a well-dressed couple dressed up for a night on the
town), and sometimes they are celebrities endorsing a product (Yläne-McEwen & Williams, 2003). These researchers have suggested that some advertisements are now featuring older adults in an “age incidental” fashion—the age of the characters in the ads is irrelevant to their portrayal. This is an interesting trend in that old people are (too) often portrayed precisely for their age status—that is, the fact that the person is old brings some humor or information to the ad, and the older person would not be there otherwise. To have older people in an ad in a non-age-relevant fashion perhaps demonstrates some more general acceptance of aging and old age in society such that these people are welcome to simply play the role of a person, rather than always being an old person.

Miller et al. (2004) present data suggesting that older adults are being shown more positively in commercials today than they were in the past. Using Hummert’s “multiple stereotypes” perspective (see Chapter 3), they coded older characters in television commercials over five decades. The results indicate that, for instance, an active “golden ager” stereotype is represented by about 50% of older characters in the 1980s and 1990s, but less than 30% during the 1950–1979 period. Conversely, negative stereotypes of older adults seemed to be used a lot in the 1970s but not at other times. These results are intriguing, and this study also represents one of only a few pieces of research that incorporate some of the stereotyping work from Chapter 3 into media content analysis. The samples of ads from each decade are not necessarily comparable, however, because they were not randomly sampled.

Overall, though, advertising does appear to be one area in which positive portrayals are fairly common. Indeed, there are some indications that advertising may be at the leading edge of genuinely positive, and even liberating, portrayals of older adults. A recent billboard for a soap product shows a woman’s face with visible wrinkles and long grey hair: She is probably in her mid to late 50s, so she is not “old” in the sense that is typically used, but she is definitely showing signs of aging. She is smiling, and beside her are two simple check boxes saying:

- Grey?
- Gorgeous?

The message is a new one: That it’s OK to celebrate the physical manifestations of aging, and that it might even be possible to see some of those markers as attractive. Unthinkable? Think again! See Exercise 8.2 for some recent advertisements: Are these sending positive or negative messages about age?
Exercise 8.2 Portrayals of Aging in Advertising

Compare and contrast the advertisements on the next two pages. What message(s) does each send about getting old? Consider alternatives, and think about why the creators might have made the messages ambiguous and what they were trying to achieve. When examining the advertisements, consider the following issues:

a. What is the visual image of the older people? What are their facial expressions? How are they dressed?

b. Does the text make reference to age or aging? How? Does the language that is used in the ad send any messages about aging?

c. Are there similarities between these ads and the one shown in Figure 8.2?

d. How are relationships portrayed in the advertisements? Which relationships are described/discussed, and with what effect?

e. Overall, what effects might come from exposure to multiple similar messages? How might these messages make younger and older people think about aging, personal relationships, or the products/services being advertised?
love is complicated.
match.com is simple.
Political Power

Holladay and Coombs (2004) discuss some common media images of older adults’ political power. These authors note that the media present groups like the AARP as “nearly omnipotent” in Washington, DC, driving policy making and striking fear into legislators with threats of how their older constituents will vote based on senior-related policy issues. The AARP...
certainly does exercise political power in Washington: It is a respected authority on aging issues, and it has the ability to mobilize large numbers of seniors on particular issues. However, as Holladay and Coombs note, older people virtually never vote as a block—older adults’ political attitudes and voting behavior are at least as diverse as any other group. Hence, the AARP has not demonstrated the power to shift election results. Perhaps as a consequence of this, its direct effects on new policy have been limited. The frequent overstatements of the AARP’s influence in Washington do, however, have some rather negative consequences. In particular, Holladay and Coombs note that these portrayals reinforce notions that older adults are “greedy geezers,” and that their political activities are entirely grounded in self-interest. More broadly, the portrayals of the AARP’s political power reinforce ideas that older adults are being looked after in the political realm, which is at best only partially true.

The Media Industry

We turn now to a brief discussion of media industry issues to help understand what has been described in this chapter. The low levels of older adults’ media portrayals and lack of positive change over time might be seen as somewhat surprising given that the U.S. media examined in most of these studies are private, commercial enterprises. U.S. commercial media rely on attracting audiences, and older adults are a large and growing audience. The U.S. population 50 and older owns $7 trillion in assets and has around $800 billion in personal income (70% of the total net worth of American households: L. Davis, 2002). Such a group would seem like a good target for television programmers and advertisers alike. So why are older people being ignored?

Obviously, decisions about the content of television shows (what the show is about, who the main characters will be) are made by groups of people. The decision to “green light” (approve for production) a television show is an expensive one for a media organization, and one that is only made when the organization is confident that the show will gain a viewership, and thus be attractive to advertisers. Don’t forget: The main goal of network television is not to make shows that entertain you. Their main goal is to deliver an audience of people to advertisers.
One commonly cited issue with portraying older people on television is that such characters do not appeal to younger viewers, and many advertisers are very concerned with getting their products in front of younger consumers. Adults aged 18–49 are often referred to as “key demographics” (or just “key demos”) within the media industry. The show that wins among the key demos can be a bigger deal than the show that gets the most viewers overall. Why?

Young people are also often believed to have more disposable income (i.e., they have cash in their pocket that they are willing to spend). It is true that a greater proportion of older people’s assets is tied up in things like stocks and real estate. If you have paid off your mortgage and own your home outright, you have control of a very significant asset, but you can’t buy a can of soda with that asset! However, in terms of pure dollars, older adults control more discretionary income than any other group (Polyak, 2000). While we don’t have a lot of research to go on, it seems likely that older adults are somewhat smarter with their discretionary spending than young people, however. So, while younger people might be attracted by a well-made commercial, older adults have a lifetime of experience with consumerism and may be somewhat more skeptical of advertisers’ claims. Perhaps they are less likely to be influenced by a 30-second advertisement and hence are less attractive to advertisers trying to sell things to us. There is also the impression (largely false) among advertisers that older consumers have decided on their brand and are unlikely to switch (e.g., if she’s driven a Buick all her life, she’s not going to change now!). David Poltrack (a researcher for the CBS television network) has argued against this by citing the example of the Lexus car brand, driven mostly by people over 50. In 2000, he said: “Lexus is a car that didn’t exist four years ago, so how did these older people come to buy it; did they think they were buying a Cadillac?” (quoted in Briller, 2000). Perhaps the philosophy of targeting key demographics has reached its pinnacle with Fox’s American Idol, a show in which anybody over the age of 28 is too old to participate (http://www.idolonfox.com/).

A final problem is that the desire for younger viewers may drive a desire for younger people to write and produce media content. Thus, not only are older adults excluded from media content, they may also be excluded from the process of media production: People who have worked hard to “make it” in Hollywood may suddenly find themselves kicked out once they pass a particular age hurdle (see Box 8.4).
In October 2000, in the case Wynn et al. v. NBC et al., a group of TV writers began a discrimination claim against the television industry. Over the subsequent years, this case has grown into one involving 23 separate class action lawsuits filed against numerous television production companies and involving hundreds of television writers. The claim is one of age discrimination: that television companies and talent agencies denied opportunities to writers and paid writers less for their work based purely on their age (see www.writerscase.com for current status information). The case is still in the legal system, but academic research on the topic suggests that the plaintiffs might have a case. Bielby and Bielby (2001) studied employment and monetary compensation for writers across different age groups. The graphs below show somewhat dramatically what was found in terms of compensation. There is a steady decline in the amount that writers are paid as they get older. Also, note that the declines are steepest for the most recent date (1997) implying that discrimination got worse between the mid 1980s and the early 1990s. Whether or not illegal discrimination has occurred is up to the courts. But it is clear that the people who determine the content of the media do not represent the diversity in their audience, and this may play a role in explaining the relative homogeneity in the messages we see. While organizations like the NAACP have been successful in increasing the presence of African Americans both in front of the camera and in the creative process, there is little in the way of such advocacy for older adults.

**Box 8.4  Age Discrimination and Media Writers**
Summary

The work described in this chapter demonstrates conclusively that media portrayals of older adults are neither fair nor realistic. Older adults are not portrayed in accord with their real presence in the population, and they are rarely shown in ways that represent the true experience of being old in all its depth and breadth. In large part, this unfortunate pattern of portrayals is reinforced by the commercial demands of the industry, as well as ingrained patterns of industry behavior, including perhaps age discrimination against writers. Future research on portrayals of older adults could usefully focus on three issues. First, it would be useful to develop ways of measuring variability in portrayals of older people. As was talked about in Chapter 7, our understandings of social groups don’t just consist of positive versus negative. We also have perceptions of how much variation there is within groups (“Oh, they’re all the same”). Television portrayals may contribute to homogeneous perceptions of older people if the portrayals lack variation. Right now, we don’t know much about how varied television portrayals of older people are,
relative to variation among portrayals of younger people. My hypothesis is
that older people are portrayed as being rather similar to one another.

Second, it would be useful to examine whether the older people who do
exist on television are clustered in a limited number of shows. This is clearly
the case with other groups; for example, although African Americans are now
present on television in larger numbers than in the U.S. population, they are
not evenly distributed. Certain shows on certain networks are “black” shows
and feature almost entirely black casts, while the majority of shows are “white”
shows. It’s not clear whether this pattern also occurs with older characters.

Finally, we need more systematic research on messages about aging.
When do words like “old” or “elderly” or “aging” get used on television and in
other media, and in what context? The media clearly inform our understand-
ing of lots of topics, and it’s time to understand in more detail exactly what the
media are telling us about getting older.

Keywords and Theories

Advertising  Humor
Counter-stereotypical  Key demographics (key demos)
Evolutionary explanations (for sex  Negative and positive portrayals
   differences in portrayals of age)  Peripheral imagery theory
Green lighting  Underrepresentation

Discussion Questions

• Which current shows feature older characters? Which of those characters would you
  regard as positive portrayals, and which as negative? Are the portrayals lead charac-
ters or peripheral characters?
• Do members of your family watch shows featuring different aged characters? Which
  shows? Why?
• Examine the advertisement in Exercise 8.2. What are the possible messages that they
  are sending about old age?
• Think about a recent portrayal of an older person that you saw in a television or mag-
  azine advertisement. What message(s) is it sending about aging?
• Do you agree that women should buy products to reduce the visible signs of aging?
Annotated Bibliography

Bielby, D. D., & Bielby, W. T. (2001). Audience segmentation and age stratification among television writers. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 45,* 391–412. A fascinating article on the age of television writers and their employment status and pay. While at times it gets a little technical, it is one of the few articles to address issues of age behind the camera, compared to a relatively large number of studies that examine portrayals of age.

Kessler, E.-M., Rekoczy, K., & Staudinger, U. M. (2004). The portrayal of older people in prime time television series: The match with gerontological evidence. *Ageing and Society, 24,* 531–552. An article presenting a very detailed analysis of older adult portrayals on German television. The approach of the authors is novel, in that they attempt to compare older people on television with the “real” status of older people in society. They conclude on this basis that certain portrayals are overly positive: that television in some cases may actually be too positive about aging issues. Such conclusions are unusual in a literature that is obsessed with how negative most portrayals are, so the article deserves reading.

Neussel, F. (1992). *The image of older adults in the media: An annotated bibliography.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. This book is now a little outdated, but still an amazing resource. It contains citations and brief descriptions of a massive range of studies of how older adults are portrayed across multiple media contexts. It provides particularly thorough coverage of the wide range of studies on portrayals in literature. The current chapter did not examine that work because much of it is in the form of a more “literary” perspective rather than a communication perspective. Nevertheless, such work is very interesting.